DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 299 819 FL 017 621

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TITLE One or Two Knotty Points and Vexed Questions about the Teaching of English Internationally.
PUB DATE Mar 87
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language (21st, Westende, Belgium, April 12-14, 1987).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Communicative Competence (Languages); *Educational Principles; *English (Second Language); Foreign Countries; *Language Variation; *Mutual Intelligibility; Second Language Instruction; Standard Spoken Usage
IDENTIFIERS *Authentic Materials

ABSTRACT

Two broad issues in the international teaching of English as a second language are discussed: the language standard to be taught (i.e., British, North American, Canadian, Australian, or some other native form), and mutual intelligibility as a principle by which to teach English. It is proposed that while language models are necessary for the learner, international toleration of differing English usages is even more important, and that while it is not possible to define an "international English," it is possible to begin to eliminate the causes of flawed comprehension or miscommunication. Greater focus in modern language instruction on the cultivation of clear speech and on general speaking ability is recommended. The definition of authenticity in learning materials is seen as less important than that the language taught be useful for communicating whatever is to be communicated. Further study of what contributes to effective or ineffective communication is encouraged. (MSE)

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One or Two Knotty Points and Vexed Questions About the Teaching of English Internationally

William R. Lee

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IATEFL International Conference, Westende, Belgium - April 1987

One or two knotty points and vexed questions about the teaching of English internationally

One of my clearest recollections of the use of English internationally is of the main post office in Athens. Greece is a country to which people come the whole year round from many parts of the world. Once there, generally as tourists, they write home to their friends telling them what they are up to and how they are coping, not least with the language. Thousands find their way to the post office in Syntagma (the central square) to buy stamps. Oral exchanges take place, on the whole, in languages of wide dispersal, and above all in English, the handiest international linguistic currency.

Few language teachers would dispute the fact that English has become during this century a means of oral and also written communication world-wide, however tenaciously (and justifiably) peoples may cling to their native languages or dialects, some unspoken outside their own locality and even in danger of extinction. English is one means of successful or unsuccessful interchange and co-operation globally, not only of course among those who speak it as a native language, but to an even greater extent among those who do not, but who have learned and acquired it, not necessarily to an advanced level of competence, as a second or a third or even a fourth language.

Nineteenth and twentieth century advance in applied science, which is one basis of change and also progress nearly everywhere, has drawn the peoples of the world closer together as at no previous time in human history, if not always in friendship and mutual admiration, at least physically and culturally. They exchange goods and services and ideas in voluntary or grudging co-operation, hear and read more and more about one another, continually revise their impressions of how other peoples think and live, visit other countries and see for themselves rather than through propaganda windows, and so in many ways begin to share in the common world-wide human

experience. The recent ferry disaster at Zeebrugge was only one example among many of how, for instance, feeling is shared across frontiers. A common human pride of achievement in, say, an outstanding feat of space exploration provides a happier instance, as does a common feeling, not altogether swamped by the emotions of over-nationalistic rivalry, of loyalty to certain broad human ideals which can be glimpsed now and then in the Olympic Games, and in some of the concerns (e.g. world health) of the United Nations.

In this modern and changing world where peoples and cultures are increasingly in contact with one another, and where English plays a leading though not unparalleled role as a lingua franca, teachers of English to speakers of other languages are faced with a range of fairly acute professional problems. Even if, personally, they can escape these, giving the excuse that as mere teachers they are not responsible for policies and cannot influence them (which is surely untrue), nevertheless their directors and advisers – the educational 'authorities', to use the accustomed term – cannot do so and have to decide on solutions of some kind. I suggest, however, that the problems are such that all language teachers, and perhaps literally everyone interested in education internationally, should think about these problems, try to form a view, and thereafter seek to exercise influence, individually and collectively.

One vexed question concerns the kind of English to teach, and thus the kind of English which should appear in course--books and other teaching materials, such as tapes. Should American or British English be the model, or perhaps Canadian or Australian English, or some other kind of allegedly native--speaker English? And if so, what variety of that English? There is also the suggestion, still radical though increasingly accepted in practice, that a native model is not indispensable. Furthermore, must the model be the same everywhere, for every kind of learner?

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To some extent the problem solves itself in practice. Outside what are called native-English territories, English has always been taught by a variety of English-users. Those who have gone out from Britain to teach in various continents have been Scottish, Irish, and Welsh as well as English, and although they may have followed syllabus requirements and course-book provision faithfully enough as far as grammar and lexis are concerned, their differing pronunciations (and especially intonations) have had their influence, however definitely Received Pronunciation (R.P.) may have been prescribed. But so far as I know, no responsible and respected body (such as the British Council) has ever gone to the extreme of refusing to appoint teachers to posts outside Britain on the ground that they did not speak R.P.: on the contrary, the rational policy has always been to look rather for teachers who are good communicators, teachers who speak clearly and are easy to understand, whether or not their speech has noticeable regional colouring. You can't expect teachers to modify their own speech very much, and if it is clear and reasonably agreeable, why indeed should they?

There are those (in Britain at least) who argue that it makes no sense to have taught R.P. for years and years in some parts of the world and to have given learners a type of pronunciation with which they can make themselves widely understood, and then to repent, as it were, and to say it was all a mistake and unnecessary. But things have been changing: a social revolution, over the decades, has quietly taken place. No longer is R.P. a badge of 'education', whatever that is. No longer is it an indicator of higher 'social status', however that may be defined. Today's BBC newscasters often have a marked regional accent, and in Britain we have grown accustomed to a great variety of styles of pronunciation on radio and TV. In other countries where English is the first language there ~~seems~~ appears to be a similar situation. People seem to have become more tolerant of one another's speech.

speech. /

To make oneself understood in English it is unnecessary to acquire several styles of pronunciation. One will do, if broad regional or social dialects are avoided because they are less widely intelligible. Moreover, there are few foreign-language learners (or, for that matter, first-language speakers) who can master the active use of several such styles.

The importance of ability to understand others, including non-native speakers of English, is undeniable. Learners have to become familiar with as wide a range of spoken English as possible, since in most parts of the world a wide range will come their way. And, quite apart from what comes their way, there is also the question of what they can go out and find and successfully cope with: here also is an aspect of their competence in English.

Doubtless it is those who are likely, for professional or business reasons, to travel widely about the world who stand in most need of systematic exposure to a broad range of varieties and styles of English speech. But let us not argue for an undue narrowing of the range, since in most large towns anywhere there will be a steady flow of visitors, both from the English-speaking countries (so-called) and from many countries where English is not well known and the native language of which is little known elsewhere.

Learning to speak (and, for that matter, to write) so that you are readily intelligible internationally is a major aspect of learning English, simply because English is an international means of communication. But this applies as much to native as to non-native speakers. Oral communication is two-sided or multi-sided. It takes at least two people to communicate; and if one of the two is unwilling or unprepared to 'negotiate' (in the socio-linguistic sense of the term), the whole burden falls on the other. It is very generally assumed that this burden has to be carried by the

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non-native speaker and that any failure of communication must be solely due to the non-native speaker's lack of competence. This assumption is questionable, largely on the ground that there is no one 'correct' English that learners have to acquire. A successful act or sequence of communication in any language appears to be as much the responsibility of the native speaker, if there is one, as of the non-native speaker. The frequent assumption that it is only the non-native speaker's business to find the syntax and lexis and intonation and everything else that has to be found to bridge the gap of understanding in a conversation with a native speaker is surely unjustifiable. The native speaker too should be 'negotiating' (that is, trimming and modifying his or her English) to bridge the communication gap.

Breakdown or partial failure of communication may be as much attributable to native-speaker disinclination to meet a less skilled and less confident speaker halfway as to anything else. Jumping a step or two in a digressive argument, I suggest that L.1 speakers of English likely to be involved in regular communication with those who do not speak English as an L.1 may stand in need of language awareness training. This, at least in a multi-ethnic and multilingual community, could with advantage begin in the primary school, and otherwise should precede and accompany modern-language learning at secondary level.

English being a world language, it is hard to see that anyone has proprietary rights over it. In the eyes of many if not most native speakers this is still a scandalous statement, and undoubtedly it is a crude one, for who can be said to possess a language? As well say that we possess the air that we all breathe. But what is awkwardly referred to as 'possession' here is just the ability to make appropriate use of the language. If we abandon, as we must, the notion and term 'correctness', as inapplicable to language use, we have also to abandon the belief that any population of speakers

speakers /

of English has a legitimate claim, simply through having acquired English as their first language, to lay down how it may and may not be used.

There is no one 'right' way of using world-wide English. We must also accept that some non-native speakers and writers of English use it more effectively in communication than many native speakers do. Very advanced non-native users of English — not of course all using English of the same kind — are to be found throughout the world. They can and do, and also should, serve as models, simply because they communicate in English with outstanding skill.

But are models necessary? I think they are. Learners demand them, and in their absence there would be a feeling of bewilderment. But what we need even more is world-wide toleration of each other's ways of using English. The criterion should be ready mutual intelligibility, preferably not merely local or regional. Fortunately there has been a steady move towards acceptance of this standpoint over the last twenty years or so. A strong tendency for English to break up and drift apart into mutually incomprehensible dialects has slowed down and may have stopped. There is still mutual incomprehension, of course, where broad forms of local dialect are concerned (within the British Isles, for instance, it is sometimes hard for speakers of Cockney English and of Irish English to understand one another), but on the other hand there can be marked local 'colouring' of speech without incomprehension arising. We have global exchanges of speech (through vastly increased travel but also through radio and tape recordings, and not least by telephone) partly to thank for this reversal. Current developments in computer and satellite technology are not likely to slow it down.

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Much research into mutual intelligibility is still needed, and indeed has barely begun. What is 'international English', and can we describe it? We cannot do this. All that can be done at present is to try to eliminate the main causes of faulty comprehension: for instance, unusual stress and intonation, insufficient differentiation of certain consonant and vowel sounds, excessive rate of speaking and over-numerous elisions, unnecessarily involved syntax, insufficient clarity of speech, and so on. In this negative way an approach can be made towards a rough-and-ready description of 'international English'. These are knotty points to settle. It would be an advantage to have such a description.

Mutual intelligibility is one thing, mutual acceptability another, though the two overlap. One can understand what is said but dislike the way it is said: the lexis may be distastefully pompous or obscure, a voice annoyingly strident or nasal or perhaps (one may think) affected. Communication, as a result, is impeded; there is psychological resistance to what a speaker is trying to convey. Some such resistance can arise, with total illogicality, from previous personal experience: you may, for example, have lived next door to an unfriendly neighbour who abuses you over the fence in a particular accent of English. Little can be done about prejudice derived in that way, unless of course you can arrange for a more friendly neighbour, speaking the same English as the abusive one, to move into the house on the opposite side. To be serious, the cure for unacceptability appears to lie as much with common sense as with research, though research may be able to help identify what exactly it is that makes some characteristics of speech less generally agreeable than others. There is no unduly knotty or vexatious point here if speech training and voice production, in the normal sense of these terms, are admitted to long-term language awareness and oracy programmes from a reasonably early age.

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Too little mention is made, in the literature on modern--language learning, of the importance of cultivating clear speech, or for that matter, speaking ability in general. Why not speak agreeably and clearly, and thus more effectively, if one can find out how?

As for 'authenticity', it is hard to say whether (internationally) it is important or not, since the word is used in a number of senses and sometimes very loosely. Authentic English is often assumed to be English as used (in speech and writing) among L.1 speakers of English, but perhaps still more often as English which has actually been used in communication among such speakers. Some interesting course--books for non-native learners of English have been published which contain a lot of English of both kinds. 'This is the sort of language you will hear and see if you go to Britain', the authors say or imply. And so there are tapes and texts of conversations which really occurred, there are newspaper cuttings, extracts from real letters, news stories from actual newspapers, and so on. This sort of material helps to bring English to life, especially for those who expect to visit Britain and for those who regard English as 'belonging' (I can't find a better word) to Britain, or of course to some other allegedly English-speaking country, and who regard the kinds of English used, however effectively, outside English-speaking countries as in some sense invalid or illegitimate.

'Authentic materials' for the learning of English are thus regarded, in line with this concept, as records (in print or on tape) of communication or attempted communication among native speakers. However, by no means everyone writing about the teaching of English to speakers of other languages uses the term 'authentic' in this way. For very many, 'authentic language' is language which has not been composed for a teaching purpose. Language composed for teaching

purposes is said to be artificial and not a part of 'real life', in which teaching is apparently not included. Once language has been used in communication, it seems that it qualifies as 'authentic'. Yet, as surely everyone knows, much of the English in which non-native learners of English all over the world communicate comes from classroom course--books and supplementary reading and recordings, some of them interesting and appropriate and some not, but none necessarily containing much, if any, text (spoken or written) which has previously been used anywhere in communicative exchanges. So the position seems then to be that course-books etc which do not contain 'authentic English' do contain 'authentic English' as soon as the users begin to use in communication some of the English which occurs in them. Such a concept of authenticity is nonsensical. On the other hand, it makes sense, and is motivating, for those who expect to visit an English-speaking country, or who particularly wish to know how English is used there, to be made familiar with 'authentic English' in the first sense – that is, with the sort of English (in its richness and variety) they will hear and see there all around them.

'Authentic' and 'authenticity' are used, more vaguely, in other senses too – one reads for instance, of 'authentic' approaches to this or that problem, meaning (presumably) approaches which are reasonably based. As far as the teaching of English internationally is concerned, however, 'authenticity' presents us with no vexed question and we need not worry much about it. What matters is that English, and any other language of wide dispersal, should be taught and learned in such a way that it serves as well as possible as a supplementary means of communication for whatever we want to communicate, or for what we come to discover, as a result of learning and acquisition, that we can communicate. Reading, as a unilateral form of communication, is not excluded here.

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In conclusion, it is clear that I have not dealt with all the vexed questions, but only with a few, and that in broad terms. I have focused on the twin concepts of a model and of mutual intelligibility. We need to bear in mind that we are all people of one planet and that English is a major way in which we can establish contact with one another. Doubtless we should now settle down to long-term study of what makes for effective and ineffective communication. And let us, also, return with our tape recorders (but not with these only, for they do not record nearly enough of what goes on) to Syntagma, one of the many places in the world where the buzz of communication internationally in English can be heard any day.

William R. Lee

March 1987